

Bridging Power: Transnational Traders at the Crossroads of Crisis and Innovation

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This paper explores “informal” patterns of economic exchange and the way they have become a dominant market model of economic accumulation and redistribution in the DR Congo-Ugandan border zone. Over the last half-century, war, displacement and economic hardship have become an integral part of cross-border systems in this region, affecting livelihoods, relations of production and patterns of wealth. At the same time, the constant repositioning of economic agents with regard to enduring economic crisis and political un-settlement has tended to generate important new forms of expertise and subjectivities that arguably constitute the foundation of vibrant social spaces. While their business primarily consists of constantly jumping scales and boundaries, cross-border traders and their political/military protectors have simultaneously been able to maintain a veil – or a semi-permeable film as Geenen (2009) puts it - between the economic centre and its economic hinterland. The border-as-economic-centre has consequently been generating new social and cultural margins that are productive of a displaced economy and society. This paper consequently treats the notion of displacement not just in immediate materialistic or humanitarian terms but also as a creator of spaces, of opportunity and seclusion, inclusion and exclusion.

The paper reflects on half a decade of ethnographic and development research among Banande/Bakozzo traders on the Congo-Uganda border. Building on the biographies of these transnational traders I interviewed over 2001-2008, I try to indicate the interplay that exists between these agents’ navigation of (trans)national economies and their conscious production of “indigenous” social spaces, which subsequently generate visual landscapes of political and economic displacement. I also try to unveil how their practices of “informal” accumulation and redistribution have gradually become the dominant - or hegemonic - mode of regulation of the cross-border economy in this region. By consciously encroaching upon regulatory texts and techniques of government, transboundary economies and the actors involved in it have been able to fundamentally challenge and transform the imageries of statehood on the border, including notions of territorial citizenship, rightful redistribution of wealth and legality/illegality. At the end of the day, this pluralisation of norms and institutions in the economic and geographical margins seems to reproduce a rather global trend of the *co-production* of sovereignties through overlap, conflict and tension rather than by linearly imposed market models of capitalism and statehood. Standing on the bridges between different life worlds, transnational traders simultaneously stand guard over the critical junctures of these overlapping networks of power, while increasingly being responsible for their closure and separation.